

Book Review

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Bag Balm and Duct Tape—Tales of a Vermont Doctor

Beach Conger, MD. Little, Brown and Company, 34 Beacon St, Boston, MA 02106, 1988. 263 pages, \$16.95.

Is there a doctor among us who hasn't at one time or another cried out at the anguish of his urban practice, vowing that,

For two cents I'd pack it all in, pick up my family, gather together the kit and caboodle, and head for the back country!

There I could go back to the simple life, practicing medicine the way it should be practiced, with grateful patients who would accept me for what I am—a good doctor interested only in rendering top-notch patient care.

No more insurance forms, no stupid Medicare rejections. No more dancing to the tune of JCAH requirements. I'll be rid of PRO watching over my shoulder. Farewell, as well, to those endless committee meetings.

That's what Beach Conger said, and that's what he set out to do. This internist, a Harvard Medical School graduate, after practicing in Atlanta and San Francisco, had finally gotten his belly full of "big city medicine." He yearned to embark on a new and different life and started looking for a way out.

During this search he impulsively answered a little classified ad he ran across in a medical journal, and almost before he knew it, he had landed in a charming Vermont village with the unlikely name of Dumster. Here was the town in which he was destined to practice within the wooden walls of a primitive hospital, where the room rent for a day was \$25, all amenities included. Later, this was to be replaced by Emmeline Talbot Memorial Hospital, brought into being without the help of a dime of government money but with the generous contribution of dollars and sweat by the townspeople. The room rate had to go to \$37.50, with an abundance of tender, loving care thrown in.

The plan was for Doctor Conger to gradually take over the practice of Old Doc Franklin, who after 40 years in the harness was ready to "slow down a bit." Perhaps it was fortunate that "Old Doc" wasn't as yet quite ready to turn all his beloved patients over to "New Doc." That gave Conger, whose love of writing was second only to his love of medicine, time to keep a diary, in which he began recording the daily happenings in the practice of medicine and surgery in Dumster, Vermont.

Life for the "New Doc" wasn't always as idyllic as he might have hoped. Sure, he was able to grow tomatoes and chop down some trees, but as the months rolled by he found himself consumed by the comings and goings, the diseases and disorders of his fellow citizens.

With the help of such colorful characters as Aaron Penstock, Buffy Upright, and Harold Purlife, Doctor Conger managed to accumulate a bundle of amazing and amusing yarns about people in all walks of Dumster life. This is a tale filled with fascinating events that involve a physician in Small

Town, USA. It might just as well have been Troy, Montana; Rock Springs, Wyoming; or even Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Beach Conger's characters are always real and mostly lovable. The stories are humorous, sometimes hilarious, and often heart-warming. He writes about Old Doc Franklin's Green Pill for Flatulence, and Mom Franklin's Elixir for Colic. And about broken legs and broken hearts.

There is Hiram Stedrock's private problem with his "male trouble" (his prostate), described by the patient in laconic Vermont vernacular with three words, "It don't work."

Mr Stedrock also provided the name for the book. When Hiram accidentally sliced his thigh with his chain saw, he tried to repair the gaping wound by pulling it together with duct tape covered with a generous smearing of bag balm, the favorite emollient of backwoods Vermonters.

When Hiram finally consented to come in to Doc Franklin for the necessary surgery, Old Doc's terse entry in the office ledger was:

Tried to make his leg into kindling.
Damn near did.
Forty-two stitches.

Even when Conger writes about his struggles with various bureaucracies, he does it without bitterness. He writes with sadness when he comments on the arrogance that is bred into young physicians during their residency training, but he derides gently. As he practices honest medicine back there in Dumster, he is able to view the big picture of medical practice. He does it from the perspective of a big city specialist happily transformed into a plain but good country doctor who had finally "gotten the hang of it."

Beach Conger uses words so well. As he comments on the birds of various feathers who come to roost in the medical community, he singles out special creatures such as Doc Franklin.

Easily identified by a telltale shock of white hair, he is truly an elegant bird. His feathers have been smoothed by the winds of time, and his talons, blunted by the grabbing of death's stony ground, are no longer dangerous. He looks more the protector than the predator; a source of comfort, not a cause for fear. When perched he appears almost tame.

What a delightful little book this is. *Bag Balm and Duct Tape* is just what the doctor ordered for a quiet evening before the fire or as a gift for a young student who might be thinking of becoming a physician.

Might we even dare to put this revealing treatise out in our waiting rooms for our patients to read?

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